COMMENTARY

# A New Deal for the Adirondacks
## Establishing an Adirondack CCC Modeled Program

By ERIC BOUCHARD

### Introduction

Between 1930 and 1940 the United States grappled with the most devastating economic crisis this country ever experienced. Today in 2008, nearly 80 years after the 1929 stock market collapse that triggered the Great Depression, leading economists are beginning to predict a similar threat approaching.[1] State and federal governments are scrambling to devise economic stimulation agendas and, if a prolonged recession again results in widespread unemployment, it is likely that protected areas near large urban centers, such as the Adirondacks, will once again be sites for such government-initiated programs as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC's goals during the Depression were to provide employment and monetary stimulus, as well as conservation work designed to establish a stable future for America's soils, waters and forests. Because current economic models condition us to falsely regard economic and environmental concerns as conflicting, land use protections and particularly the constraints of ecological sustainability on public lands will certainly seem "too costly" when human prosperity appears to hang in the balance.

During the Depression this now-outworn premise of eco-economic conflict combined with ecologically misinformed interpretations of Article XIV permitted environmentally degrading projects in the Forest Preserve such as road and dam building, recreational skiing construction and reforestation with nonnative species. We, however, are now entering an era of economic and environmental crises that will inevitably force us to recognize a far more salutary premise: that a healthy economy relies upon a healthy environment. Proposed projects do not need to compromise the integrity of the Park nor require suspensions of the strict protections of Article XIV and the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan to accomplish economic agendas. Presently, the need for an economic stimulus in New York combined with the number of labor-intensive, ecologically based needs within the Park justifies reconsideration of the 1930s CCC as a model for a new Green Corps in the Adirondacks.

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### The CCC Model

Utilizing the CCC as a model for a modern Green Corps would undoubtedly provide essential economic and employment stimuli; an examination of the original program reveals, however, that a simple replication would threaten current land use management practices and ecological stability. In New York State alone, employment through the CCC provided nearly 220,000 men with conservation work and over 3 million nationwide (Thompson 33). These figures suggest just how much a modern CCC could assist in expanding New York's employment capabilities. In addition, the entire job opportunity spectrum of the CCC demonstrates the program's ability to evaluate and undertake tasks according to site specificity. Assessing site-specific projects from the past reveals this very trend. Outside the Park, the majority of CCC projects involved state park facility development, flood control, soil stabilization and hardwood seed collection (Thompson 34). On Adirondack Forest Preserve lands, projects carried out by enrollees were more extensive and fell into five distinct categories: recreational development, such as the creation of trails, lean-tos and campsites; forest fire control; pest control; reforestation; and fish and game management (Thompson 33–4). Additionally, CCC crews rehabilitated degraded stream corridors and managed forests with the greatest pest, disease and fire potentials on Adirondack private lands (Thompson 33). The extensive nature of Adirondack CCC projects was likely the result of a state-initiated attempt to expand the tourist industry, particularly with the emergence of the automobile. Economic stimulus by means of a prosperous tourist industry is as appropriate for the Adirondacks today as it was in the 1930s, especially as mass unemployment, rising populations and the deterioration of cities increase the human need for escape.

CCC projects such as road and dam building, ski area construction and nonnative species reforestation without constitutional amendments (for the Forest

Preserve) or careful consideration (for private lands) would be prohibited by today's strict environmental standards. Yet they were permitted due to governmental decisions, compromises and exceptions for the economic emergency and an anthropocentric, utilitarian perception of conservation based on so-called scientific forestry innocent of ecological principles—both appearing to justify loose interpretations of Article XIV. The vast majority of projects carried out by the CCC fell under the category of fire prevention and detection, including truck trail and fire line creation and campground clean-up and maintenance.[2] It was the controversy concerning the construction of a bobsled run on Forest Preserve lands for the 1932 Olympic Winter Games and the judicial decision that followed which left future fire prevention efforts open to interpretation. This influential court ruling of March 1930 concluded that

> Such an undertaking for sport was unconstitutional, yet on the other hand similar activities for fire prevention efforts (i.e., Truck trail and campground construction) may be permitted, so long as they 'did not call for the removal of timber to any material degree.' (Graham 186)

The urgency of protecting a severely logged forest from fire combined with the ambiguity of "any material degree of timber removal" justifying truck trails and fire lines on the Forest Preserve allowed these activities to continue. Commissioner Lithgow Osborne, in response to his forestry team's recommendations, ". . . decided to build a series of dirt roads [along with improving existing roads], using CCC labor, mostly along the route of old tote roads, into the preserve, so that trucks would have [easy] access to fires" (Graham 190). Validating this decision as a fire prevention effort, Osborne explained that

> The truck trails are dead-end roads, running nowhere from a communication standpoint, and hence would not fit into a conceivable state or county highway system, and further that a few trees would have to be cut, of course, but [he believed] it would equal the number felled within the usual unofficial exemptions made on the Forest Preserve. (Graham 190)

The invasiveness of road construction caused The Forest Preserve Association in 1935–36 to approach the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks (AfPA) to assist in mounting a campaign against future CCC road building efforts (Pilcher 10). Recommendations proposed not only the discontinuation of the program, but the demolition of existing truck trails. The AfPA, however, decided to remain neutral, eliminating the possibility for successful litigation (Pilcher 10). Today, many of the trails once designated "fire use only" have been upgraded to serve both state and private interests, thus further fragmenting wildlife habitat. Additionally, pressures to expand recreational motorized access (i.e., snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles) continue to increase.

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There is a lesson to be learned here: Once a road is built, regardless of the reason, inappropriate motorized access will inevitably increase amid availability. Perhaps it was Leopold who said it best: "Recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind" (Leopold xvii).

Similarly, our understanding of the impact of dam construction and reforestation with nonnative species has evolved. Concerning CCC constructed dams, Commissioner Osborne argued that

> Yesterday swamps and lakes were drained; stream watersheds were thoughtlessly destroyed. Today, dams are being built to restore water levels in swamps and lakes; trees are being planted. The establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps has advanced work of this type to a state which would have seemed impossible a few years ago. (Osborne)

The construction of dams, Osborne believed, was essential in improving both local aesthetics and the sport fishing industry (Osborne). The construction of Marcy Dam, for instance, was a product of CCC labor (Cooper). Today, dams are regarded as increasingly environmentally destructive and as decreasing rather than "improving" the effectiveness of aquatic ecosystems.[3]

As for Adirondack reforestation efforts, by October of their second year (1934), over 18 million trees were planted on over 126,500 acres (Will Plant Some of 1935 Tree Stock This Fall) and the CCC did not stop there. Nearly 3 billion trees were planted nationwide throughout its decade-long existence (McKibben). This certainly helped in the restocking of Adirondack forests, the stabilization of its soils and the reduction of erosion. Nonnative Norway spruce trees, however, were also planted amongst them, along with native red and white pine stands (Smallidge). Two recent surveys of a once heavily logged New York watershed forest revealed that the forests replanted with nonnative Norway spruce have posed no real threat to New York's ecosystems so far. As for long-term effects, only time will tell (Salmon River Watershed Viability Analysis). Climate change, for example, may make them subject to invasive pathogens more than native species. In any case, road and dam construction and nonnative species reforestation were only a small fraction of the overall works carried out by the original CCC. These projects alone represent the scientific and ecological naivety of the 1930s and Adirondack governmental decision making.

**Future Implications**

Present concerns such as climate change, energy alternatives and efficiency, and the widespread existence of exotic invasive species justify the need for Green Corps labor. Although the strict limitations of our contemporary interpretation of Article XIV would alter the scope and focus of Green Corps work from its predecessor, it could nevertheless perform services that may prove essential. Benefits may not only contribute to the Park's natural future, but also educate program participants concerning current ecological practices and guidelines. Labor intensive environmental projects like species inventory and restoration, reforestation and exotics removal can all provide environmentally friendly employment opportunities within the current constraints of Article XIV.

Invasive species management provides a good example. Currently there are 10 major invasive exotic species in the Adirondacks that pose a potential risk to native ecosystems. They include four terrestrial plants, four aquatic plants and two aquatic life forms, all of which require management.[4] Accomplishing this task will require long-term, labor-intensive efforts. The Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program seeks to educate the public regarding potential risk factors and techniques; it is unrealistic, however, to expect a single volunteer organization to meet the demands of management particularly as the climate continues to change.

Climate change in the Northeast, as the Northeast Climate Impacts Assessment program explains, means that the climate will

> continue to warm in the coming decades, [and] even more dramatic changes are projected—changes that have the potential to alter many aspects of the region's climate that are vital to its economy, ecosystems, character and quality of life. (Northeast Climate Impacts Assessment)

Ecosystems will be altered with longer growing seasons increasing the risk for invasive species and pathogen assaults. Presently there are 11 insect, disease and fungi species within the Adirondacks, some of which are exotic invasives[5] (*Forest Pests of the Adirondacks*). Should single or multiple epidemics escalate to a point of extensive forest devastation, tree stands left to decay will augment fuel loads increasing the risk of fire. To avoid forest fire disasters similar to the 1903 and 1908 Adirondack forest fires, the introduction of a Green Corps could have the potential to work within affected areas, digging fire lines to control burns, reducing fuel loads, and eradicating remaining forest offenders.

Insect-based pathogens that threaten human health will also increase with climate change. Though environmentally friendly advances in tick control would become a necessity to reduce the spread of Lyme disease, currently the bacterial enzyme BTI can be utilized to control mosquito larvae and reduce the threat of such diseases as the West Nile virus (*Mosquito Surveillance*). The addition of a Green Corps could impact the spread of disease through current and advancing treatment techniques targeting heavily infested areas.

Beyond this, a Green Corps could also impact present issues concerning fossil fuel depletion and cost increases. Projects aimed at reducing fuel dependency within Adirondack communities and exploring alternative means of travel and heating can be developed. This could include labor hours devoted to collaborative, rural public transportation systems. Existing railroads could be reestablished as well as bus terminals and systems. Transportation within larger Adirondack communities might also include the addition of trolleys.

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As for heating demands, with municipalities becoming increasingly concerned with air quality, rather than turning to unprocessed cordwood as a renewable fuel source, consideration could be turned toward wood pellet heat. Wood pellet heat is a sustainable alternative that utilizes timber waste products as well as improves air quality (*What is Pellet Fuel?*). The utilization of Green Corps labor to develop a wood pellet industry may be beneficial by not only establishing a practical alternative energy source for heat, but also opening up new employment opportunities in pellet production. This type of project could result in a shift away from our fossil fuel reliance and toward utilization of locally available resources.

Funding and the management of a Green Corps are issues not addressed in this commentary. The original program was the responsibility of the federal government and management involved both state and federal agencies. The addition of such a program today, however, would mean that the Adirondacks, which currently are subject to a multitude of managerial complexities including the Adirondack Park Agency, Department of Environmental Conservation, nongovernmental organizations and interests groups, would need to add a layer of federal management, which would further increase the risk for managerial incoherency. These concerns

will certainly need to be addressed, but the need and opportunities for Green Corps labor are great and the resulting economic and environmental benefits

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could be made possible without compromising the integrity of Article XIV. A healthy economy truly does rely upon strong environmental protections and a contemporary Green Corps would prove to be the link that upholds this essential and fundamental premise.

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**Notes**

[1] For example, see *The Financial Times,* Martin Wolf's prediction that the combination of the deteriorating housing market, a reduction in personal saving and catastrophic losses in the Federal reserve (due to higher prices, lower wages and increases in bankruptcy) may in the near future lead to an economic crisis the likes of which have not been experienced since the Great Depression. The greatest concern lies in the Federal Reserve losses as the federal government can absorb only a portion of the debt, leaving a great deal still due and money taken away from other essential programs (Wolf).

[2] The CCC and campgrounds: The commission determined that CCC's involvement would "protect from illegal and indiscriminate camping; the building of fireplaces for campers, for instance, was a fire protection measure. The cutting of dead trees for firewood was also accept[able]." Because many of the new tourists were unaware of proper fire safety etiquette, making these facilities available would greatly reduce the threat of forest fires (Graham 188).

[3] Though for centuries thousands of dams have been constructed for various human needs, it was not until the "past 50 years that the social and environmental impacts of dams have been measured and studies indicating that they have not only fragmented and transformed the world's rivers, but displaced 40–80 million people by reservoirs" (*Dams and Development*). In addition, environmentally, dams collect silt and thus decrease the effectiveness of reservoirs by starving streambeds and sandbars downstream of essential nutrients needed for healthy aquatic ecosystems (Cunningham 230).

[4] *Aquatic invasive:* Eurasian water milfoil, water chestnut, curly leaf pondweed and fanwort; *terrestrial invasive:* Japanese knotweed, purple loosestrife, garlic mustard and common reed grass (*Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program*); *aquatic life:* zebra mussels and lampreys (*Adirondack Council Water Initiative*).

[5] *Potential impacts:* Asian longhorned beetle, emerald ash borer, sudden oak death (oomycetes) and hemlock woolly adelgid; *(have had) significant impact:* beech bark disease, chestnut blight and Dutch elm disease; *(continue to have) significant impacts:* armillaria (fungus), common pine shoot beetle, gypsy moth and forest tent caterpillar (Forest Pests of the Adirondacks).

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